

United States Senate Committee on Rules and Administration

Hearing – “Bipartisan Support for Improving U.S. Elections: An Overview from the Presidential Commission on Election Administration”

Statement of Senator Charles E. Schumer February 12, 2014

At the core of our national identity as Americans is a pride that we live in a democracy and have the right to vote. In the 225 year journey since the first presidential election, many things about elections have changed. For example, more people are eligible to vote – African-Americans, women, and 18 to 20 year olds – and today’s expanded electorate is much more reflective of our nation as a whole. But as recent examples have shown, there are still problems with our elections, many of which could be addressed by improving the way we administer them.

Election administration is a difficult and often thankless job. So, before I go any further, I’d like to thank the election administrators and officials for all of the election days that have gone right over the years. It is not an easy job yet, because it is so important to our democracy, we aspire to perfection. In reality, most Americans don’t even think about the running of an election until something goes wrong. We all remember Florida during the 2000 presidential election and Minnesota’s 2008 U.S. Senate race where recounts put our election process under a microscope.

As recently as the 2012 election, many polling places throughout the country had unacceptably long lines. This was not the first election with that problem, but we would all like it to be the last. In his election night victory speech, President Obama referenced those long lines declaring, “We need to fix that.”

That’s a difficult task because elections in the United States are uniquely run at the state and local level. With our 50 states, we have 50 unique election systems and thousands of election districts. While this patchwork system sometimes creates challenges, former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously called the states “laboratories of democracy” – they sometimes provide us with examples of innovation that can be shared across the country.

Soon after the last election, the President acted and created a bipartisan commission to study election administration and best practices for improving voting in America. The President insisted that this not be a partisan exercise. The commission was supposed to seek out the best ideas for making voting easier and better no matter where they came from. And that’s what it did.

This Presidential Commission on Election Administration was made up of ten members that included current and former election officials, executives from successful customer service-oriented businesses, and two co-chairs – one Republican and one Democrat. Those bipartisan co-chairs are our witnesses today.

Mr. Bauer and Mr. Ginsberg, you have been on opposing sides in both political campaigns and the courtroom. You both have top-notch credentials as advocates and champions for your respective parties, and you are uniquely qualified to identify areas where we should be able to move forward.

I would like to thank both of you for serving on the commission, and for finding places where we can move beyond partisanship and focus on the nuts and bolts of making the running of elections easier and better for voters and administrators alike. Your commission's report is an outstanding piece of work and a valuable roadmap for improving election administration in this country.

While the commission's charge did not include recommendations for federal legislation, the report makes it clear that there are areas of existing law and its enforcement that must be improved. This committee will study your report and your testimony today carefully. I hope that my colleagues from both sides of the aisle will join me in using this report to help to improve our election system and thus strengthen our democracy.

Thank you for your work on this important issue and for joining us today. I look forward to hearing your testimony and discussing what you learned.